Hist 101

Final Essay

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**Primary Source Response**

Source 9.1:

The text of *The Life of Xuanzang* as written by the Monk Huili describe the travels of a Chinese traveling monk through ancient times in ancient Asia. These excerpts come from the long period in which travelers between nations were mostly long-distance traders and visiting dignitaries, which Xuanzang fit into the latter category. This excursion was a trip by Xuanzang to exchange knowledge with the other countries along his journey, visiting various nations as he traveled with the protection of China. Such exchange of information by travelers and merchants as they moved between countries was one of the primary means for spreading new technologies and philosophies. The author was very focused on the philosophical and religious side of the interactions between Xuanzang and the court of Samarkand in the country of Sogdia, a country that no longer exists whose land is owned by Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, though the author also spoke at length about Xuanzang’s travels to other prominently holy Buddhist monasteries in the area. Some of this passage reads not unlike a tourist who visits numerous locations and sees rare artifacts that excite them. As this excerpt lists remarkable historical locations, artifacts, monuments, and customs, this and other information around it would be invaluable to establishing timelines and creating parity with modern ideas and locations.

Source 10.3:

This excerpt taken from *Cronica del Peru* attributed to Pedro de Cieza de Leon concerns observations that de Leon made during the conquistador era of Peru and ancient Peruvian cultures of the Andes. De Leon traveled through foreign territory of relatively less advanced cultures while paying more attention to the landscape and less the needs of the people whose lives he was intruding upon. He acted as a chronicler for the things he and his party saw, and he took special interest in recording agricultural information he thought would be useful to Spain, as well as what he saw unusual aspects of the local culture such as their burial habits and the remarkably architecture he was encountering. These specific passages involve the Collas, an ancient nation in the Andes that had settled a valley that de Leon considered inadequate due to being too high of elevation, and also Tiwanaku where he was impressed by their ancient structures and stonework though disappointed by their lack of writing and often incomplete buildings. Regardless of the often haughty attitude of de Leon, these writings are nonetheless invaluable for providing descriptions of things such as what foods were being farmed and harvested and adding context to the timeline presented by ancient ruins and artifacts from the area.

**Final Exam Essay**

**The Occurrence of Religion Under Oppression**

Throughout human history, there has been a frequency of organized groups to attribute aspects of the natural world to a higher divine order. This comes through a wide variety of interpretations for different societies, sometimes warlike and hostile, other times peaceful and supportive. There have been observable trends in the which religions are preferred by societies at different times in their economic and imperial power, such as how harsher treatment of the lower castes in Vedic Age India gave rise to Buddhism. However, other cultures retained violence as a continued system of control, such as the long era of cultures that utilized human sacrifice in Mesoamerica. Religion has been common for governance in many cultures otherwise, though it can be argued that this is directly related to the influence the religion has on the people being governed and their socioeconomic status. It can further be said that religions that preach goodwill often result in wider spread popularity with those caught under harsher systems, such as the rise of Christianity and Islam despite systemic oppression.

In ancient India as far back as 1500 B.C.E., there was the organization of a system of oppression that intertwined religion and social values. This was a slow process that took centuries and was recorded in the very long history of ancient India through texts such as the *Rig Vedas* and the Laws of Manu. The *Rig Vedas* lays out the religious structure that was meant as a means of control through organization, forcing certain parts of the populace into specific groups from which they couldn’t escape in life.[1](#RigVedasRedux) Utilizing religious values as a means of control over the population began with the idea of “varna,” which formed the roots for a class-based social structure that stratified the different levels of economic success.[2](#VedicVarnic) The system of varna placed religious leaders at the top of the social hierarchy, separating and protecting them from the lower classes by way of military structures. This allowed the religious leadership to use the military, which was divinely inspired, to maintain the system that gave them such control. The varna system eventually evolved into the even more oppressive jati system, which was otherwise known outside of India as the caste system.

However, ancient India saw a slow revolution come about in response to this strict system of religious governance. Starting around mid-500 B.C.E, India started undergoing shifts in their religious appeals, likely due to stresses put on the populace by the caste system. This time saw the rise of several new religions, both of which rejected the caste system in its own way, which were Jainism and Buddhism, though eventually the rise of Hinduism re-embraced social stratification.

Jainism first arose and pushed back against the Brahmins of the caste system with the concept of asceticism, which focused on a life of pure austerity and spartan living and total pacifism, though these aspects hindered its spread during the relatively wealthy and peaceful times of ancient India. Around the same time, Buddhism arose and took advantage of the same internal social stresses that had given rise to Jainism to create a widespread appeal to people across India and beyond. In both cases, these religions grew rapidly in popularity in part thanks to their messaging of peace and promise of acceptance of all people from all walks of life, which proved to be powerful motivators for growth of both religions.[3](#Jainism_Buddhism)

Centuries later after the world political stage had changed, a new religion arose in the Middle East in Palestine that also preached spirituality and fairer treatment. Not unlike Buddhism, Christianity attributes its foundations to a singular preacher who traveled while spreading his ideas which caught on with a populace that were often frustrated or fearful of the system they were currently under. Also similarly to Buddhism, these ideas were often that of self-reflection and goodwill towards other humans, which stood in contrast to the dominant religions of the time. Though monotheistic religions already existed, Christianity proved to be flexible with its rituals while retaining an identity of support.

Its preacher Jesus of Nazerth sought to reach out to those conflicted by the competition created by the Romanization of Palestinian Judaism.[4](#Christianity) The polytheistic structure of Roman religion was seen as intrinsically incompatible with Jewish values, and this gap in understanding allowed for the rise of a religion that preached goodwill and understanding for all people. Though in entirely different times and places, this messaging was not dissimilar to that of the Buddha, encouraging personal faith and development of the individual over the oppressive demands of the currently dominant religions. This created a huge burst in popularity for Christianity, and its appeal grew all the faster as rulers realized the need to follow the will of their peoples. Rather than counteract the messaging, the motivation of Christianity was strong enough to survive centuries of enslavement and oppression, ultimately leading to schisms and the development of entirely new religions such as Islam.

Standing in contrast to the peace-motivated rise of Christianity and Buddhism, however, are the religions of Mesoamerica. Commonly themed with blood sacrifices, documentation from the era includes mentions of humans being killed for the sake of religious motivations. These cultures of sacrifice survived through the centuries around the same time as the rise of Christianity on the other side of the world, and despite the brutality, human sacrifice was maintained as a practice through a variety of different forms. Though much of Mesoamerican history was passed on by oral traditions with infrequent and unspecific writing systems, the demand for blood was documented as late as the invasion of the Spanish conquistadors centuries later. Though the conquistadors had their own motivations as well.

In further contrast to the relatively peaceful religious revolutions seen in response to establishments like the jati system and the Romanic pantheon, the often brutal and harsh religions of Mesoamerica saw fewer documented attempts to move towards models more supportive of individual growth. Instead, their relatively warlike and bloodthirsty values remained through the upheaval of numerous civilizations, with blood sacrifices being recorded for civilizations such as the Maya[5](#MayanSacrifice), the Quiche[6](#QuicheSacrifice), and the later Aztecs over the course of many long centuries. Each of these cultures pursued similar sacrificial rituals such as capturing nobles from nations and taking specific individuals from their own, passed across national borders and down through centuries of history. This period was often without a strict written language as well, leaving these practices to have been passed on through oral traditions[7](#AztecOralTraditions).

Areas such as Vedic-age India and Roman-era Palestine saw times of relative peace and prosperity that allowed for introspection of the people to develop new ideas that encouraged understanding and encouragement to break away from harsh religious controls. During times of great prosperity such as the height of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan and its twin of Tlatelolco, there was a continued evolution of human sacrifice, and the pressure of religion was as an added means of control of the populace. This era could be likened to Vedic Age India, though the ideals of bloodshed as a means of sacrifice to the gods was built deeply into Mesoamerican religions that there was no religion of peace that rose up to counteract their harsher inclinations. Perhaps a social revolution in Aztec culture would have come about similarly as occurred in other oppressive societies elsewhere in the world had it not been for the invasion of the Spanish, but that would be left for speculation.

Through history there is an inclination for humanity to use religion as a means of control and oppression starting from the top of social power structures. The unifying effect of religion creates united peoples, though there are trends for religion to eventually become oppressive and maintain a hierarchy of inequality. These trends have been counteracted by new religions that arose and presented arguments more favorable conditions for the people of their occupant societies, though as seen throughout history, simply providing better opportunity for spirituality has not always been a successful driving force.

Citations:

1. (Primary Source) Hymns of *The Rig Veda* (1500- 900 B.C.E.) – Purusha-Sukta, or The Hymn of Man (10.90) hymn 12, transcribed into Smith, Bonnie G., Marc Van De Mieroop, Richard von Glahn, and Kris Lane. *World in the Making: Volume One to 1500*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2022, Chapter 3
2. Smith, Bonnie G., Marc Van De Mieroop, Richard von Glahn, and Kris Lane. *World in the Making: Volume One to 1500*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2022, Chapter 3, page 99
3. Smith, Bonnie G., Marc Van De Mieroop, Richard von Glahn, and Kris Lane. *World in the Making: Volume One to 1500*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2022, Chapter 4, page 163.
4. Smith, Bonnie G., Marc Van De Mieroop, Richard von Glahn, and Kris Lane. *World in the Making: Volume One to 1500*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2022, Chapter 6, page 217.
5. Smith, Bonnie G., Marc Van De Mieroop, Richard von Glahn, and Kris Lane. *World in the Making: Volume One to 1500*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2022, Chapter 10, page 353.
6. (Primary Source)Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 138 – 141, 156 – 157, transcribed into *Maya Hero Twins Vanquish the Lords of the Underworld*, Smith, Bonnie G., Marc Van De Mieroop, Richard von Glahn, and Kris Lane. *World in the Making: Volume One to 1500*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2022, Chapter 10, page 362.
7. Smith, Bonnie G., Marc Van De Mieroop, Richard von Glahn, and Kris Lane. *World in the Making: Volume One to 1500*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2022, Chapter 15, page 557.